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God Bless You, Mr. Vonnegut

By [A. O. SCOTT](#)

"A New York friendship," Kurt Vonnegut once wrote, "is a friendship with a person you have met at least once. If you have met a person only once, and you are a New Yorker, you are entitled to say, whenever that person's name comes up in conversation, 'Yes - so-and-so is a friend of mine.'" "

I am therefore proud to call Vonnegut my friend. Well, almost. One evening some years ago, at a literary party at an apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, I was sitting at one end of a living-room couch intently studying a bowl of mixed nuts when I became aware that someone had sat down on the other end. The walrus moustache, the curly salt-and-pepper hair, the crumpled pack of Pall Malls in the shirt pocket - I instantly recognized him from the line-drawn self-portraits that accompany some of his books. Not surprisingly, I found myself too star-struck to say a word. A while later, I was scolded for my timidity by a friend of mine who is also a friend of Vonnegut's, something I had just missed the chance at becoming. "He was sitting right there next to you for 15 minutes and you completely ignored him," she said. I stammered that I hadn't been able to think of anything to say. "How about, 'I like your work'?" she wondered.

Fair enough. Allow me, then, to make up for that lost opportunity and tell Mr. Vonnegut that I like his work. Sometimes more than he does, judging from a self-grading report card he published nearly 25 years ago, in which he gave "[Breakfast of Champions](#)" a stingy C and "[Slapstick](#)" an unwarrantedly severe D. (On the other hand, the A's he handed out to "[Jailbird](#)" and "[God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater](#)" seem to me a bit inflated. But friends can disagree.) I am reminded of my long affection for his writing by the arrival of his new book, "A Man Without a Country" (Seven Stories, \$23.95), a slim, grouchy collection of columns, many of them from the twice-monthly left-wing magazine *In These Times*, illustrated with sketches and aphorisms silk-screened by the Kentucky artist Joe Petro. But this book's publication also causes me to realize that, over the years, I've taken Vonnegut somewhat for granted, and perhaps not taken him as seriously as I should have.

Which puts me, I'm sorry to say, in the company of a great many other critics. In the standard narratives of postwar American literary history, he is indeed a man without a country - or at least a writer who cannot easily be placed. And placing - sometimes at the expense of reading or liking - is an activity that preoccupies critics, perhaps to a morbid degree. Vonnegut started out selling stories to popular magazines after the Second World War. Then, like his hard-luck sometime alter ego Kilgore Trout, he gravitated toward science fiction, planting seeds of allegory in the pulpy loam of 50's genre publishing. A decade later he seemed to be a central figure in the wave of experimental literature that would eventually be called postmodern. A novel like "[Slaughterhouse-Five](#)," with its chronological displacements, its antirealistic flights, its bitter satiric energy, its digressions and self-explanations and refusals of narrative decorum, seemed to partake of the same zeitgeist that spawned Barth and Barthelme, Pynchon and Gaddis.

But the younger novelists who nowadays claim those old masters of the avant-garde as their forebears don't usually include Vonnegut in their canon, and he never really belonged among the hothouse practitioners of what [Gore Vidal](#) used to call "R & D" fiction. (He is, though, something of a grandfather figure for writers like Dave Eggers and Jonathan Safran Foer, whose work sometimes echoes his way of mixing whimsy and earnestness.) For one thing, his work has always been accessible - funny, direct and pointed in its ethical and political intentions. There is no need for a scholarly concordance or an interpretive apparatus to figure out what Vonnegut means. He is happy to tell you so himself, with reference to such unimpeachable and equally plainspoken exemplars as Abraham Lincoln, Eugene V. Debs, Mark Twain and Jesus Christ. But this transparency, while it has made Vonnegut a perennial best seller - and a favorite with the young - has diminished his utility in the academy, where literary reputations are made and preserved.

Occasionally he has seemed to mind being underestimated in this way: "It has been my experience with literary critics and academics in this country," he wrote in one of the essays collected in "[Palm Sunday](#)," "that clarity looks a lot like laziness and ignorance and childishness and cheapness to them. Any idea which can be grasped immediately is for them, by definition, something they knew all the time."

No one, to my knowledge, has ever complained that Vonnegut is ambiguous or obscure. And no one is likely to be surprised by the views expressed in "A Man Without a Country," some of which have been expressed more or less verbatim in previous books. An avowed humanist - a creed he defines as trying "to behave as decently, as fairly and as honorably as we can without any expectation of rewards or punishments in an afterlife" - he is perpetually out of sorts with the human race. In particular, our wanton disregard for the environment and for one another drives him crazy, even to the point of losing his sense of humor: "The biggest truth to face now - what is probably making me unfunny now for the remainder of my life - is that I don't think people give a damn whether the planet goes on or not."

His liberalism grows out of some principles that can only be called conservative, like the belief in community and extended family that has become one of the big themes of his later work. He remains unimpressed by technology or the other trappings of progress, and he remains one of America's leading critics of evolution - not of the theory, mind you, but of the practice, which has left us far too clever and vain for our own good.

It will hardly come as a shock that Vonnegut - who identifies himself as "a lifelong Northern Democrat in the Franklin Delano Roosevelt tradition, a friend of the working stiff," and therefore unapologetically "sappy" - has a low opinion of the current American administration and its policies, and "Man Without a Country" has already joined the ranks of the Bush-bashing best sellers that compete with liberal-bashing best sellers for dominance in our overheated climate of opinion. But Vonnegut is much funnier, and much crabbier, than the cable-bred

polemicists, and smarter too. At times, he may slide toward Andy Rooneyesque or Grandpa Simpsonsque crotchiness, but mostly, like his literary ancestor Mark Twain, his crankiness is good-humored and sharp-witted, and aimed at well-defended soft spots of hypocrisy and arrogance.

On Nov. 11 he will turn 83, and since he has no expectation of a heavenly perch from which to look down and eavesdrop on his friends, it is best that we appreciate him while he's still around. "A Man Without a Country" is a fine place to start, especially since it can lead us back to "Mother Night" and "Slaughterhouse-Five" and "The Sirens of Titan" and the stories collected in "Bagombo Snuff Box." In other words, it's like sitting down on the couch for a long chat with an old friend.

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